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An Inquiry into Comic Making

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AN INQUIRY INTO COMIC NAMING

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Tom Thimble, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, Blifil, Peepy Jellyby, Poll Sweedlepipe, Blazes Boylan, The Honorable Augustus Fitz-Edward Fitz-John Fitz-Osborn. Comic literature is filled with funny names. But what makes the names funny? What is the source of the comedy in comic names?

Seeking the answer to such a question immediately leads us into the morass of definitions of comedy, even more multifarious than those of tragedy. The theories have ranged from the physiological causes of laughter through attempts to categorize what we laugh at to the ultimate purposes of comedy and the comic vision. The longest and loudest laugh I have heard recently came from a colleague who was finally promoted whereas an administrator whom he had seen as an obstacle had been fired. It occurred to me then that the source of comedy is <u>triumph</u>. But triumph comes in many guises. It subsumes the feeling of relief that we are not as ugly, stupid, awkward, outlandish, self-deluded, or badly off as someone else--in short, all that Cicero and later rhetoricians included under the term <u>turpiditudo</u>. It also

subsumes the joy of discovery and problem-solving, the ability to see through a pun or incongruity, the ability to see a surprising relationship between apparently disparate things. Triumph can include the feeling of relief from physical, social, psycho-sexual, or religious restraints that frequently results in the laugh at bawdy or irreverent humor. There is the Bergsonian triumph of freedom over mechanical, ritualistic limitations that restrict our human self-hood. There is the ultimate triumph over death and damnation that leads to Northrop Frye's concept of the "green world" and to Dante's Commedia. And there is the triumph of perceiving that the world and the language we clothe it in are both illusory, absurd, and yet the only vehicles of life and thought--the ultimate irony.

Names can be found to fit all of these categories of triumph. When Dickens characters acquire nicknames such as Short Trotters (Old Curiosity Shop) or Sloppy (Our Mutual Friend), or when children's-story characters are named Dumbo or Dopey, we see turpiditudo as the source of the names. Supposed ethnic inferiority gives rise to names like Mickey Finn, Fritz Katzenjammer, Step-'n'-Fetch-It, the egregiously honorable Augustus cited above, and others. As long ago as the pseudo-Aristotelian Coilsinian Tractate (ca. 4th-2nd century B.C.), diminutives were seen as giving rise to laughter.[1] And so Little Bo-Peep, Li'l Abner, Little Dorrit, and Sissy Jupe fit the sense of comedy. Jimmy

Carter's diminutive name may have helped him get elected President in 1976 when voters were seeking child-like innocence, but may have helped him lose in 1980 when voters could no longer take him seriously. Also fitting names in comedy are those that are associated with childish sounds, such as Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Through the Looking Glass), Lord Boodle (Bleak House), and Blinkiter Doddles (Little Dorrit). Without denying the meanings that Martha Onan found in Didi and Gogo, from Waiting for Godot,[2] the childishness of these names is laughable in itself. The defective characters of Count Smorltork (Pickwick Papers), Mrs. Jellyby (Bleak House), Blifil (Tom Jones), and Mr. Pecksniff (Martin Chuzzlewit) are all revealed in their names, but here we tend to move from simple turpiditudo to puns and problem-solving. Even though some of the humor in the names Blifil and Pecksniff results from the grotesque and haughty expressions that their pronunciation forces one's face to assume, the recognition that this expression is congruent with the character is even more important.

The better forms of humor are likely to be multiple, to evoke laughter at more than one thing. Thus, for instance, when we encounter a name like Dewey Dell Bundren in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying we might laugh at the mere childishness of it. But when we learn that Dewey Dell is a naive nymphomaniac we see the appropriateness of her name and triumphantly enjoy our perception. Most comic names are of this sort: they

seem absurd as names on the surface and even funnier when we see their appropriateness or incongruity to the characters who bear them. Jonsonian comedy is filled with them: Captain Bobadill, Sir Epicure Mammon, Tribulation Wholesome, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Jordan Knockem, Adam Overdo, et al. So is Dickensian comedy, although some of his charactonyms take on a darker hue: Thomas Gradgrind, Mr. M'Choakumchild, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Jeremiah Cruncher, et al. Sometimes what seems like a simple charactonym or naming pun opens into something more sinister. Montgomery Ward Snopes, for instance, from Faulkner's trilogy, seems to show the petty mercantilism of the parents who named him, but Monty Snopes will buy and sell anything, even the life of his own uncle. By the time we perceive this, our smile may be a bit grim. And Lump Snopes, another member of the family, seems to have a name simply indicative of turpiditudo, like Sloppy. But when we learn that he chose Lump to replace his given name of Launcelot, the comedy darkens and becomes complex. Not only do we see the comic disparity between the names Launcelot and Snopes, the names Launcelot and Lump, and the name Launcelot and the grasping character of this person, but the fact that Lump is the self-chosen name to replace Launcelot shows us how deliberate is this character's deviation from his mother's hopes for him. We solve the puzzle, but our triumph is clouded with horror.

Bawdy names are common also, from Dick Peters and

Tommy Screwzer to Doll Tearsheet and Mrs. Quickly. I suppose Falstaff, whose soldier's pole has somewhat fallen with age and disease, fits into this category also, although his name is probably better analyzed as a multiple pun, for his "staff" of office is also "false." Beckett's Pozzo gets some of the humorous force of his name from the bawdy connection, and Godot makes irreverent fun of God. As Freud pointed out, psychical energy becomes free as a result of the momentary lifting of the inhibition, but our psycho-censor demands that the lifting be subtle, indirect.[3]

Names such as Prospero, Fortunatus, Bonario, Celia, Lovewit, and Wellborn, all found in Renaissance drama, are appropriate in their various ways for that triumph over social, economic, or familial restrictions that so often image the great restriction of death. Although such names are not funny, as Poll Sweedlepipe is funny, yet they help to set us in the proper frame of mind to rejoice with the characters in their ultimate triumph.

Redene Namen are not only signposts and labels to character, they are also limits and containers. When readers see the correspondence between name and character they rejoice in their perceptiveness. But further, they recognize that the give-away name, which opens the character up to amused inspection, is a liability. Readers rejoice that they are not so transparent, so easily identified; their human complexities remain their own business. And still

further, not only does a name like Horner or Pinchwife label the character, it defines and restricts him. He must behave and think in certain ways: Horner must be a cuckolder and Pinchwife must be a jealous husband. Like mechanical toys, they lack human freedom to choose their own paths. The reader's triumphant awareness of his own freedom is a further source of joy.

Finally, some authors show that the act of naming is itself comic, since it absurdly seeks to impose an identity. All names are an attempt to delimit that which is inherently illimitable--the identity of a human being. This is most clearly seen when writers play with names alphabetically, as in Bleak House Dickens rings the changes on Lord Boodle's name through Coodle, Doodle, Foodle, all the way to Noodle.[4] Another such passage is from Joyce's Ulysses:

> He rests. He has travelled.
>
> With?
>
> Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailer.[5]

In such passages the author calls our attention to the basically artificial, arbitrary process of naming. Although in real life, parents often give their children names in hope that the children will grow to fit them, and sometimes the

children do, social conventions and ignorance of the future introduce restrictions to effective charactonyms. So real names usually seem to be little related to character and are therefore mostly arbitrary and opaque. Although authors often try to imitate life in this regard, their control over the characters of their works gives them more freedom to allocate appropriate names. This increased control and freedom make more apparent the artificiality and arbitrariness of the act of naming. Comedy can be found in perceiving the tension between this artificial delimitation and the need to organize life through names, just as a deliberate departure from the conventions of a genre is comic (as when a character in a play steps out of character to address the audience directly). Especially in such alphabetic name-play as in Ulysses, some authors use this tension as a source of comedy.

Context, however, is all-important. In Death Of A Salesman, we triumphantly recognize the "Loman--Low Man" pun. We add to it our reinforced status as opposed to the turpiditudo of the childish name Willy and the social inferiority of Loman. Further, Willy seems fixed in the transparent, inflexible identity created by his name. But, since audiences have learned, like Pagliacci, that clowns can suffer, and since Willy struggles against the fate embodied in his name, we see the heights of Willy's aspirations by contrast with the clownish level of his name. Thus, Arthur Miller uses the traditional aspects of comic naming to heighten the pathos.

In a similar manner, Billy Budd (nicknamed Baby) has a name that, in its diminutive and punning ways, prepares us for comedy. Again, the comic expectations heighten the pathos of his death but may also lead us further to the Dantean triumph of his apotheosis as he "took the full rose of the dawn."

Names, therefore, are like the masks or false noses worn by harlequins and clowns. They both reveal and conceal the common humanity of their wearers. They both reveal and conceal the artificiality of all appearances. In our triumphant perception of what they reveal and what they conceal we can find a major source of comedy. In our sympathetic recognition of the face behind the mask we can often find springs of pathos.

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NOTES

[1] Paul Lauter, ed., Theories of Comedy (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1964), pp. 21-22.

[2] Martha Onan, "Names in Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot," Literary Onomastics Studies 6 (1979), 246-260.

[3] Sigmund Freud, A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, tr. Joan Riviere (New York: Permabook, 1953), pp. 78-82.

[4] G. L. Brook, The Language of Dickens (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 211; the whole chapter is valuable.

[5] Fred Miller Robinson, The Comedy of Language (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 42-43.